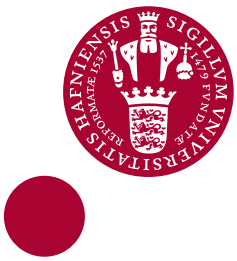

Practices of Response in Public Speaking

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Practices of Response in Public Speaking

The Transformation of Revision Techniques into Oral Feedback

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At the Rhetoric Section of University of Copenhagen public speaking is taught at the fourth semester of the bachelor program – a semester where the students also study rhetorical criticism. The two courses are placed at the same semester in order to strengthen the dialogue between rhetorical theory and practice. However, the public speaking class is carefully prepared already during the first year due to oral exercises and minor speeches aiming at educating the individual speaker, combining theory and practice, and building up an oral culture of response which will be elaborated later on in the public speaking class. Thus, *to receive* constructive feedback in an oral as well as written form is considered a productive way to improve speaking and writing skills. And to *give* constructive feedback is, on the other hand, seen as an important rhetorical competence based on thorough analysis, which is refined during the curriculum as a whole, which – contrary to many rhetorical programs in USA (Hauser 2004: 45-47, and Keith and Mountford 2014: 2) – both include composition, rhetorical criticism, and public speaking etc. Thus, the oral and written rhetoric is taught at the same section, and the teachers stay in close dialogue throughout the semesters to ensure that the courses logistically cohere. In Copenhagen we therefore have built up a teaching tradition, which William Keith and Roxanne Mountford seem to point at in their "Mt. Oread Manifesto on Rhetorical Education" (2014):

> However, the centrality of rhetoric to the learning of speaking and writing is rarely articulated, and the work of teachers of writing and speaking to develop common learning outcomes is sadly uncommon. It is time for rhetoricians from across the disciplines to work toward an integrated vision of rhetorical education. Without such a vision, we deny our students, as well as society, an essential resource for political and social progress. It is time to address the institutional structures that make impracticable the integration of instruction in writing and speaking. Though their history within separate disciplines obscures it, rhetoricians have a common interest, an interest that is disguised by the current separation of writing and speaking instruction. (2)

The article can be seen as an example of a synthesis of speech and writing. It focuses on the construction of *an oral response culture* at the first year, which is later on further developed during the public speaking class at the second year where feedback is an essential and systematized part of the learning process. The priority to feedback, oral as well as written, at the Rhetoric Section is

strongly inspired by cognitive writing research – e.g. based on protocol analysis (Flower and Hayes 1981: 367-368) – with an emphasis on planning and revision, which are translated into problem-solving strategies (Hayes and Flower 1986: 1106). In the article I will therefore discuss aspects of this important research, which can be seen as a theoretical warrant of the feedback culture at the Rhetoric Section in Copenhagen.

As a visiting professor in the United States in the 80s Christian Kock became familiar with cognitive research in composition, which he used as an inspiration when building up the writing program at the Rhetoric Section in Copenhagen. I have been introduced to the importance of feedback and response culture by Kock and have later on tried to transform these techniques, primarily aiming at writing, into oral feedback to improve speaking. In the transformation process I have added old principles of imitation inspired by Quintilian's *Institutio Oratoria*, in that I have acted as a role model showing the students how to deliver constructive feedback of an oral presentation and asked them to imitate my way of doing it when delivering oral feedback themselves. Moreover, I have encouraged the students to imitate the aspects of the student speeches, which they especially appreciated or were affected by.

The class 'Rhetorical theory and analysis' at the first semester of the first year aims at introducing the new students both to rhetorical theory, history, and practice. The students become familiar with oral rhetoric due to exercises and smaller speeches anticipating 'Public speaking' at the second year. I have deliberately tried to create a connection between 'Rhetorical theory and analysis' and 'Public speaking' by using response techniques at the first year anticipating the more elaborated feedback of the 'Public speaking' class. When finishing 'Rhetorical theory and analysis', autumn 2015, I received 32 evaluations from the present students focusing on response culture and feedback. The first year students have been informed of my little pedagogical project and have accepted that I use their class and their evaluations as a case study. We decided not to use anonymous evaluation. I therefore refer to the quotations from the individual students by using their first names.

Why is feedback from other students important?

Linda Flower and John R. Hayes refer to a research project by E. J. Bartlett from 1981 comparing revision processes in fifth grade students who were revising both their own and other writers' texts. When the children were revising their own texts, they were able to find 56% of missing subjects or predicates, but only

10% of faulty referring expressions. When the children, on the other hand, were revising the texts of *other writers* they detected about half of each type of problem (Hayes and Flower 1986: 1110). Thus, to build up a culture of response ensuring feedback from other students is an effective way to improve writing. The students will, moreover, become trained analysts who are used to detect and to diagnose rhetorical utterances and suggest global as well as local improvements.

Detection and diagnosis in oral feedback

Composition scholars seem to agree that good writing is rewriting (e.g. Hayes and Flower 1986: 1109-10): that the secret of composition is what happens *between* the drafts (Sommers 2000: 283) and that this working process ought to be based on a detection, a diagnosis, and a *revision process*: "a sequence of changes in a composition – changes which are initiated by cues and occur continually throughout the writing of a work" (Sommers 1980: 380).

I shall claim that good speaking is likewise based on both revision of the manuscript and substantial feedback of the rhetorical delivery. However, the latter has the character of an important 'afterthought' (Sommers 1980: 379) in that the speech is not being presented in front of the class again in a revised form. But still it might improve future speeches. When presenting feedback orally, I am therefore using the three major gates presented in "Detection, Diagnosis, and the Strategies of Revision" (1986: 27) by Linda Flower, John R. Hayes, Linda Carey, Karen Schriver, and James Stratman: 1) detecting that a problem exists, 2) building a diagnostic representation and 3) selecting a strategy. Thus, I follow the logical progression of the steps and try to point out global problems before focusing on the local ones (Hayes and Flower 1986: 1112).

In 'Public speaking' at the second year the students both achieve feedback after having written the manuscript and when delivering the speech. Moreover, they receive written feedback (based on the finished manuscript) by a group of students as well as by the teacher. In that way they will be able to use feedback both for a revision of the manuscript and for improvements of their delivery.

Oral feedback as a psychological challenge

Oral feedback in front of an audience of students is a psychological challenge: it is of greatest importance that the feedback to an individual student is always

delivered in a productive way. A student must never feel that he was totally destroyed by severe criticism in front of his classmates, which might make him loose his confidence in himself and make it difficult for him to mount the rostrum again. To make sure that the feedback is always constructive and surrounded by positive comments, I present the first feedback myself. Moreover, I encourage the students to consider both the successful aspects worth imitating of the speeches and the aspects, which ought to be improved.

Imitation and feedback

In book 10 of Quintilian's *Institutio Oratoria* imitation of a role model aims at inspiring the individual student in order to develop his own rhetorical talent (Andersen 1995: 223). Quintilian considers it a universal rule of life (omnis vitae ratio) (book 10,1,2).

> It is for this reason that boys copy the shapes of letters that they may learn to write, and that musicians take the voices of their teachers, painters the works of their predecessors, and peasants the principles of agriculture which have been proved in practice, as models for their imitation. (book 10,1,2)

Quintilian does not focus explicitly on great masters, such as Cicero. In book 2 of *Intitutio Oratoria* he also highlights the importance of the *close* role model, e.g. the teacher, who is encouraged to recite daily for his pupils:

> He should declaim daily himself and, what is more, without stint, that his class may take his utterances home with them. For however many models for imitation he may give them from the authors they are reading, it will still be found that fuller nourishment is provided by the living voice, as we call it, more especially when it proceeds from the teacher himself, who, if his pupils are rightly instructed, should be the object of their affection and respect. (Book 2, 2, 8).

However, the pedagogical method should not aim at uncritical imitation, which might lead to copying defects of the role models:

> For despite their greatness they are still but mortal men, and it will sometimes happen that their reader assumes that anything which he finds in them may be taken as a canon of style, with the result that he imitates their defects (and it is always easier to do this than to imitate their excellences) and thinks himself a perfect replica if he succeeds in copying the blemishes of great men. Book 10,1,25).

Thus, the student should always know what he is supposed to imitate and why:

> Consequently it is of the first importance that every student should realize what it is that he is to imitate, and should know why it is good. (Book 10, 2,18)

In ”Rhetorical theory and analysis” I specifically ask the students to imitate my way of building up a ‘feedback sandwich’: the feedback should be surrounded by positive comments (the bread), and the critical comments should be placed in the middle (filling) and always appear as concrete, constructive, and friendly suggestions (Kock and Heltberg 1997: 272).

Later on when the students deliver feedback themselves as part of oral exercises, they are forced to divide their attention between analyzing/interpreting and performing themselves (Terrill 2011: 311). In that way the students become aware of being surrounded by utterances, which have formed and still form new utterances. Thus, the students achieve an intertextual understanding of themselves as communicators in both a historical and contemporary context when both analyzing the utterances of others and performing themselves: ”Such a student imagines herself neither to be declaiming in isolation nor speaking into the ether, but always to be in dialogue with innumerable other texts and thus formed, in part, through them.” (Ibid.: 309)

Introducing exercise aiming at building up a culture of response

In order to create the foundation of a constructive oral response culture, I already introduce the concept ‘oral feedback’ as part of a meta-discussion when I meet the new rhetoric students for the first time:

We carry out an exercise where the students are supposed to work together two and two. They are told to use some minutes to choose an experience from their summer holiday for a short story before taking turns to tell the story to the collaborator. Both students are supposed to tell the story twice. The first time the listener has to act in an active and empathic manner showing great interest in the story, for instance by commenting and asking the narrator questions. The second time, on the contrary, the listener has to show no interest at all, for instance by avoiding eye contact, concentrating on his smart phone, and yawning. The exercise ends with a discussion: How did the two ways of listening affect the narrator and the story? When the students have discussed the exercise two and two, we use to have a concluding discussion in plenum. I ask them, for instance, how we can use the experience of the exercise when working with oral rhetoric in practice? Often the significance of a good audience is highlighted –

that attentive and supportive listening affects the speaker's rhetorical delivery in a positive way and helps to develop his individual talent (*natura*).[1] On the contrary, the non-attentive listening, which affects the speakers in a negative way, should be avoided. It makes the narrators loose their confidence in themselves, which again affects the rhetorical quality of the story. If a nice atmosphere is created, it is easy to feel free to improvise, try new oral tools as a speaker, and to give and receive immediate oral feedback after the exercise. In that way a constructive learning process including response will be able to expand.

Comments from the students

In the evaluation form I ask the students "How did you experience the storytelling/listening exercise?" Here are some of their answers:

Nynne: "As both unpleasant and rewording at the same time. The importance of the audience's behavior became very clear."

Emil: "It was interesting to see how big a difference it made. When you are speaking in front of an uninterested listener your story changes a lot. An active and interested listener can, on the other hand, make a story great."

Rebecca: "It was quite an eye-opener. I didn't know just how much it affects the person speaking, whether the audience was interested or not."

I also asked the students whether the exercise helped to construct a supportive atmosphere among the first year students by highlighting the significance of an attentive and interested audience. Here some of their answers:

Tina: "Absolutely yes! The exercise made me talk more and listen more to my new student friends. It made me feel more comfortable being around them because we broke some personal limits during the exercise."

Sine: "Yes I really think that it did. But not the exercise alone. Also the theory from the classroom helped me to understand the importance of the interested audience."

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[1] In the rhetorical tradition three things were requied from the students: a ready nature (*natura*), careful study (*ars*), and laborious exercise (*usus*). *Natura* means both talent and preparation in the studies propaideutic to rhetoric. *Ars* consisted of the activities of rhetorical criticism, and finally *usus* implied oral interpretation and imitation of canonic authors to invention and performance in progymnasmata and declamation exercises, over a period of years. (Walker 2006: 149-150).

Laura: “I think the exercise was helpful for us to realize what power a supportive audience has. Afterwards we have focused on a supportive atmosphere and I do not know whether it would have been the same without the exercise, but it did occur as a focus in class afterwards.”

Sophie: “Yes, it did. It also served as an ice-breaker, seeing how being intentionally inattentive felt equal parts awkward and rude, but we could all laugh it off together.”

The two main exercises

When the two main exercises of ‘Rhetorical theory and practice’ are carried out, I use to refer to the first listening exercise to remind the students of the importance of a good audience. The new exercises have the form of three minutes speeches. The first is a presentation speech, and like the very first exercise on listening, the students work together two and two. They are supposed to present each other for the class. As a preparation of the exercise they interview each other and are told to concentrate on one (or at least few) topics and elaborate these characteristics in a manner that makes the person memorable, for instance by using storytelling and appeals to the senses (evidentia). Before they deliver the presentation speech – with the person who is being presented standing at their side – we make specific feedback appointments: we agree upon using the ‘feedback sandwich’. When performing the presentation exercise I use to deliver the first feedback myself acting as a role model. When the students respond to the individual speakers later on, I use to correct their feedback if it does not follow the rules, which we agreed upon.

The second and last exercise is inspired by writing research by Linda Flower and John R. Hayes, who consider the free topic a way to improve student writing because of increased knowledge and motivation (Hayes and Flower 1986: 1108). Thus, the students are allowed to choose their own, individual topic, and this time the students deliver oral response immediately after the speech. However, I correct their feedback if it does not follow the rules. Moreover, I comment on the individual speech when the students have finished their oral response.

Comments from the students

In the evaluation form I ask the students to describe their experience of *receiving* feedback. Here are some of their answers:

Sophie: “It was a nice blend of constructive feedback. Everyone has been great at pointing out the good and the bad things equally.”

Steffan: “Fantastic, suddenly you received constructive and very useful feedback that made my development/skill in speeches increase drastically.”

Victor: “It was a good experience. The fact that other people had listened encouraged me to turn feedback into improvements.”

I also asked them to describe their experience of *giving* feedback. Here are some of their answers:

Victor: “I felt that using the “feedback sandwich” came to me naturally and it worked well.”

Karoline: “The sandwich has become my favorite tool, it makes it possible to be critical even though you are talking to your friends.”

Nadia: “I think I have learnt more about feedback in general by giving feedback because you have to think about both what you say and how you say it, and you are aware of how you would like to receive feedback yourself – and you try to do it that way.”

Feedback in ‘public speaking’

In ‘public speaking’ at the second year feedback is an essential part of the pedagogical progression. The students are divided into groups, and each group has specific tasks: they are taking part in a speech workshop where the members of the group present their speech drafts for each other and receive feedback (both from the other students and the teacher). Moreover, they are asked to present feedback to another group based on both the finished manuscript and the delivered speech in class. Finally, they discuss the whole process of writing and delivering a speech in a speech report where they also discuss the received oral and written feedback.

Future perspectives

A way to develop the feedback culture would be to include web-based feedback (Böhme 2009: 2). If videos of the student presentations were uploaded on the intranet of the university, the students would be able to compare earlier presentations with newer ones and evaluate the progression in their feedback. Commentary functions might also be used for spontaneous feedback. To focus explicitly on video speeches would also call for a theoretical discussion of virtual orality: When public speaking is video-recorded and broadcast on the Internet, it thereby attracts – sometimes simultaneously – a new, more distant, audience, who, like readers, are able to leaf through the discourse and rewind, re-view, and re-listen. In contrast to a present audience, a mediated audience might be able to observe the speaker in a close-up recording that unveils details of the performance, such as facial expressions, which the present audience is not able to see. However, an 'authentic' transmission might also be chosen with cameras focusing on the situation as a whole as well as on the speaker's interaction with her audience – a parallel to live music recordings, where one also experiences the musician's dialogue with the audience. Thus, 'video orality' has achieved *permanence* – originally a literary characteristic. On YouTube sound does not only exist when "going out of existence" (Ong 1996: 71). Watching and listening to a video recorded speech therefore also promotes an observer's approach, detection, and diagnosis when delivering feedback. Of course evanescence and connection to the real time still mark the original rhetorical delivery in front of the present listeners, but the video recording may still influence the rhetorical choices of the speaker: When a speech can be watched over and over again by an Internet audience, he might, for instance, choose not to use quite as many repetitions – however, repetitions help the listeners in the concrete situation, who experience the speech in the present moment of the delivery. The speaker will therefore have to weigh pros and cons when deciding on a rhetorical strategy to accommodate the different audiences.

Conclusion

The response culture, which has been built up at The Rhetoric Section in Copenhagen, is based on a close dialogue between written and oral rhetoric. Thus, research in composition has helped to establish a tradition for feedback of both oral and written utterances. Likewise, oral rhetoric has influenced teaching in composition in that orality in writing is in some ways considered an ideal: to include examples and *evidentia* enrich both speaking and writing and create memorability. And to recite when writing often helps to ease the grammatical structure and improve tone and rhythm of the text.

New media is often hybrids between orality and literacy, which also calls for a tight connection between composition and public speaking in a rhetoric program, so that all aspects of e.g. communication on the Internet can be thoroughly dealt with.

Thus, there are many reasons to support William Keith and Roxanne Mountford's manifesto and the Interdisciplinary Project on Rhetorical Education (iPRE), which aims at advancing scholarly and professional engagement on rhetorical education at all levels of learning (Keith and Mountford 2014: 4). To call together different aspects of rhetoric in one program, will both enrich the didactic tradition, the theory, and the practice. Moreover, joined rhetoric sections will be able to cope with new types of communication including both orality and literacy.

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